

VZCZCXRO8373  
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #1792/01 3201327  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 161327Z NOV 07  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0072  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0882  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1885

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001792

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/16/2027

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN REPRISING SPOILER ROLE, FRENCH  
INITIATIVE AT RISK

BEIRUT 00001792 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) If successful, the French initiative to solve Lebanon's presidential crisis will lead to a compromise president not wholly satisfactory to either the March 8 or March 14 political blocs. While far from ideal, that is probably the best solution possible, given domestic, regional, and international realities. Yet if Nabih Berri and Saad Hariri find a consensus choice from the still-secret list of candidates deemed acceptable by Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, Lebanon's political crisis does not end but shifts onto a new stage: March 14 risks splitting, as March 14 Christians lament the compromise as betrayal. These divisions will appear just as March 14 needs strength and unity for selecting a new prime minister, forming a new cabinet, and developing a new cabinet program. While we don't minimize the challenges, we believe that, ultimately, March 14 unity can be preserved even in the face of a less-than-perfect president. So, despite its warts, we hope the French initiative succeeds.

12. (S) But, over the last 24 hours, evidence is growing that the French initiative will not succeed. Our assumption is that the pro-Syrian forces in Lebanon do not want a compromise president and prefer to wait for an opportunity to insert LAF Commander Michel Sleiman or someone less tested but totally beholden to Syria. The challenge for the pro-Syrians is how to block the French initiative from succeeding without appearing to thwart the French or undercut the Patriarch's authority. This is where Michel Aoun, shameless as always, is happy to reprise his frequently played role as spoiler.

13. (S) Michel Aoun, spewing vitriol at the U.S. and lambasting the Ambassador in a televised performance before his supporters on 11/15, announced that he will not recognize a president who wins even two-thirds of Lebanon's parliament, if that means one-third of the Lebanese -- i.e., the Christians -- do not accept the choice. Aoun also rejected as unconstitutional the idea of the Patriarch naming candidates and insisted that his name not be included on any list from Bkirke. As we told French Charge Andre Parant today (11/16), Aoun is establishing the intellectual foundation for declaring later that any president that emerges from the French initiative is illegitimate and

unrepresentative. As he has so many times before, Aoun is on the verge of rejecting a solution accepted by most Lebanese and the international community.

14. (S) Aoun thus creates the conditions by which the French initiative is stillborn. Hizballah leaders -- if (as we expect) they are unhappy with the Patriarch-proposed names under discussion by Hariri and Berri -- can then cite Aoun's loyalty to them, unwavering even during war and despite objections from the United States, in explaining that they have no choice but to stand with Aoun now. Berri would then tell Hariri that, while he was perfectly willing and ready to make a deal, he cannot defy the wishes of the majority of the Shia (with Hizballah) and the majority of the Christians (with Aoun). The French initiative thus collapses, Emile Lahoud's presidential term ends, and the chaos and uncertainty that could follow suits the pro-Syrians' interest in seeing LAF Commander Sleiman chosen as the person best positioned to "save Lebanon." If asked, the pro-Syrians will proclaim their innocence and point to Aoun as the cause.

15. (S) We believe that this explains why Berri has insisted so vigorously that we help bring Aoun on board for any compromise solution. UN envoy Geir Pedersen told us that Berri's message to Ban Ki-Moon was the same: it is not enough for Aoun to remove himself from the race; as the most popular Christian politician, he must back the solution as well. Berri may truly want a solution, since his power and authority derive from his legitimate parliamentary role. No one is more directly threatened by Hizballah's ascendancy and the Hizballah-Aoun alliance than Berri. We think Berri, on his own, could probably live with any number of potential compromise presidential candidates acceptable to Hariri. But, much as he may want a solution, by appealing to us for help, Berri is also -- again -- shifting responsibility onto others. We predict that, if the French initiative collapses, he will claim how much he wanted to elect someone from the

BEIRUT 00001792 002.2 OF 002

Patriarch's list, but he could not because we did not do what he asked vis-a-vis Aoun. By this argument, he will blame us for the collapse of the French initiative (a charge certain to be repeated in the pro-Syrian media here).

16. (S) In separate 11/16 meetings, the Ambassador shared his analysis with French Charge Parant, Saudi Ambassador Abdulaziz Khoja, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt, Minister Marwan Hamadeh, and Ghattas Khoury (with a request that Khoury share it with Saad Hariri). Basically, all agreed that it is likely Hizballah will stand behind Aoun, with Aoun's stance then providing the pretext by which the French initiative fails. To avoid this scenario, the Lebanese politicians agreed to try to work on March 14 Christians, to get them more committed to the French initiative, and those parts of Michel Aoun's bloc who may be willing to break with the General in favor of a genuine compromise president.

17. (S) We hope that international support for the Patriarch's list will also help corner Berri. While there has been no acknowledgment of the transmission of the list to Hariri and Berri, and despite the fact that the names on the list will remain secret, the existence of the list is public knowledge. This gives us the opportunity to begin cornering Berri (and Berri may actually welcome being cornered into having no choice but to go along). But, alas, we draw a blank when trying to think of ways to persuade Aoun himself to play a constructive role rather than the spoiler. At least if we can split a few MPs away from him, his credibility in speaking for the Christians diminishes. Moreover, if Aoun causes the collapse of the French initiative and thus forces March 14 to try a "half-plus-one" parliamentary vote for a new president, having a few Aounist MPs on board and drawing the candidate's name from the Patriarch's list will help strengthen any president elected in that manner.

FELTMAN